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# Young victims put first

## Detective says job is 'a whole different world'

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Stuffed animals, dolls and toys galore fill the room. Colorful pictures and drawings cover the walls.

Any child would feel comfortable in this room at the Child Advocacy Center, and that comfort may help them talk openly and honestly, said Judy Covington, director of the center.

But the stories they share — of physical and sexual abuse — are horrific.

The team of professionals that deals with child sex abuse cases must hear the details and act in the best interest of the child, Covington said.

"These kids come in here as happy kids," Covington said. "They don't know what's happened to them is bad, because this person they love has told them it's not bad. It's hard for an outsider to understand. They make (a child) believe it's normal and it happens to all children."

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Clarksville Police Detective Ginger Fitting investigates child abuse cases at the Child Advocacy Center. / Greg Williamson/The Leaf-Chronicle

Written by **TAVIA D. GREEN**  
The Leaf-Chronicle

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In the forensic interview, Ann Fisher talks to the children and asks them questions in a non-leading way. The interview is videotaped on a closed-circuit camera.

In another room, law enforcement officers and a Department of Children's Services case worker watch.

Ginger Fitting, a detective with the Clarksville Police Department, is usually one of the officers in the next room watching.

Fitting said the things a child says in the interview will be used to gather supporting evidence to back up the child's claims.

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This is a four-day series on the investigation and prosecution of child sex abuse cases in Montgomery County.

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The alleged abuser is interviewed, along with any other people the child may have mentioned. Details about the abuse the child disclosed are investigated, Fitting said.

A case may take eight to nine months to investigate, depending on how things work out.

**The detectives**

Fitting and Detective Misty Darland handle child abuse cases in the city, and Investigator Julie Webb handles county child abuse cases.

Right now, Fitting said, they have a heavy workload, because they are one detective short.

Locating people who need to be interviewed, waiting for medical lab results and finding ways to corroborate a child's story are all time-consuming processes, she said.

Fitting said she is driven to do her job, which she has been doing for two years.

"It's stressful at times, but rewarding," she said. "It's a whole different world. All you deal with is kids being sexually abused. It's very stressful, and you have to find that good balance between personal life and job."

The detective working the cases brings them to the District Attorney's Office, and Art Bieber, assistant district attorney, and Lee Caira, director of victim-witness services,

discuss with the detective the evidence and ways to find corroboration.

Fitting said sometimes more interviewing or other evidence may have to be gathered before a case is ready to be considered for prosecution.

"It's a lot more complex than what a normal citizen would realize," Fitting said.

**The watchdog team**

The cases come before CPIT, or Child Protective Investigation Team, once a month, and the members determine the progress and classification of each case.

The law requires that a CPIT exist in each county.

Members of the team vote on these cases, then DCS records the data, using it to provide further services for victims.

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Covington and Caira both said DCS has had some internal problems and large turnover.

Rob Johnson, spokesman for DCS, said they have started boosting case workers' pay to cut down the staff turnover.

These statistics from DCS are reported on Jan. 15 of each year to the state House of Representative and Senate Judiciary Committees.

"The team is there for the protection of the child," Fitting said. "Not everything can be criminally prosecuted, so they're there to make sure the investigation between DCS and law enforcement is done."

Some members of CPIT come from the Child Advocacy Center, which makes it easier to interact, Covington said.

The majority of the cases that come to CPIT are unfounded — cases where an investigation proved the allegations false, said Art Bieber, assistant district attorney.

Caira said most of those claims come from nasty custody battles.

"It could be Mom and Dad are in a divorce and Mom puts the child up to say something about Dad," Caira said.

Bieber said they try to screen out revenge allegations.

Caira said in cases where the perpetrator can't be prosecuted but they believe the allegations are true, they can "indicate" the person or cite that the allegations were made and investigated. Sadly, the "indicated" cases don't usually make it to a judge, Bieber said.

If the detective or CPIT feels strongly about the allegations and there is not enough evidence, they can still take it to the grand jury, Bieber said.

No arrest is made until a true bill is handed down by the grand jury.

CPIT members work well together and provide support for each other in working these cases, Fitting said.

"It's a very supportive group of people. All of us deal with it, we know what happens to these kids," Fitting said. "We're all very supportive of each other."

Covington said team members are doing the best they can do under their limitations.

"I'm very passionate about it," she said. "I think we're doing the right thing and we have a long way to go. There's more improvements to be made. It's very frustrating because of our laws and court rules. A lot of things can't be presented, and that's real hard for families to understand."

### **Improvements**

Covington said Montgomery County has come a long way in dealing with child sex abuse cases, but there are still improvements to be

made.

She said the team is pushing to make sure children who are abused are always referred for counseling.

Referring families for services has been a weak point, Covington said, but they are working to provide it for all children who have been abused.

In July, Covington said they plan to bring in a family advocate who can talk to family members and explain the court system and procedures.

Also, the medical specialist agency, Our Kids, will be housed in the Child Advocacy Center starting in May. Our Kids is currently in Nashville. The office here will improve interaction between workers and provide sex abuse exams.

### Getting justice

Covington said the process of investigating and prosecuting child sex abuse cases is long, and in the end, the laws and rules of the court may not bring about the justice a family desires.

"I know it's aggravating to families," she said. "I wish there was one thing that made them understand. Even us professionals don't understand. I can imagine how frustrated" they can be.

Although the system is not perfect, Fitting said reporting the abuse is critical.

"People don't realize how big of a problem it is," she said. "Parents need to be aware of what children say, because kids rarely lie about sex abuse.

"Sex abuse is big issue, and people don't like to hear about it. It's been better in recognizing and reporting it, but some parents don't report it. If anyone knows about sex abuse, they have a legal duty to report it."

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